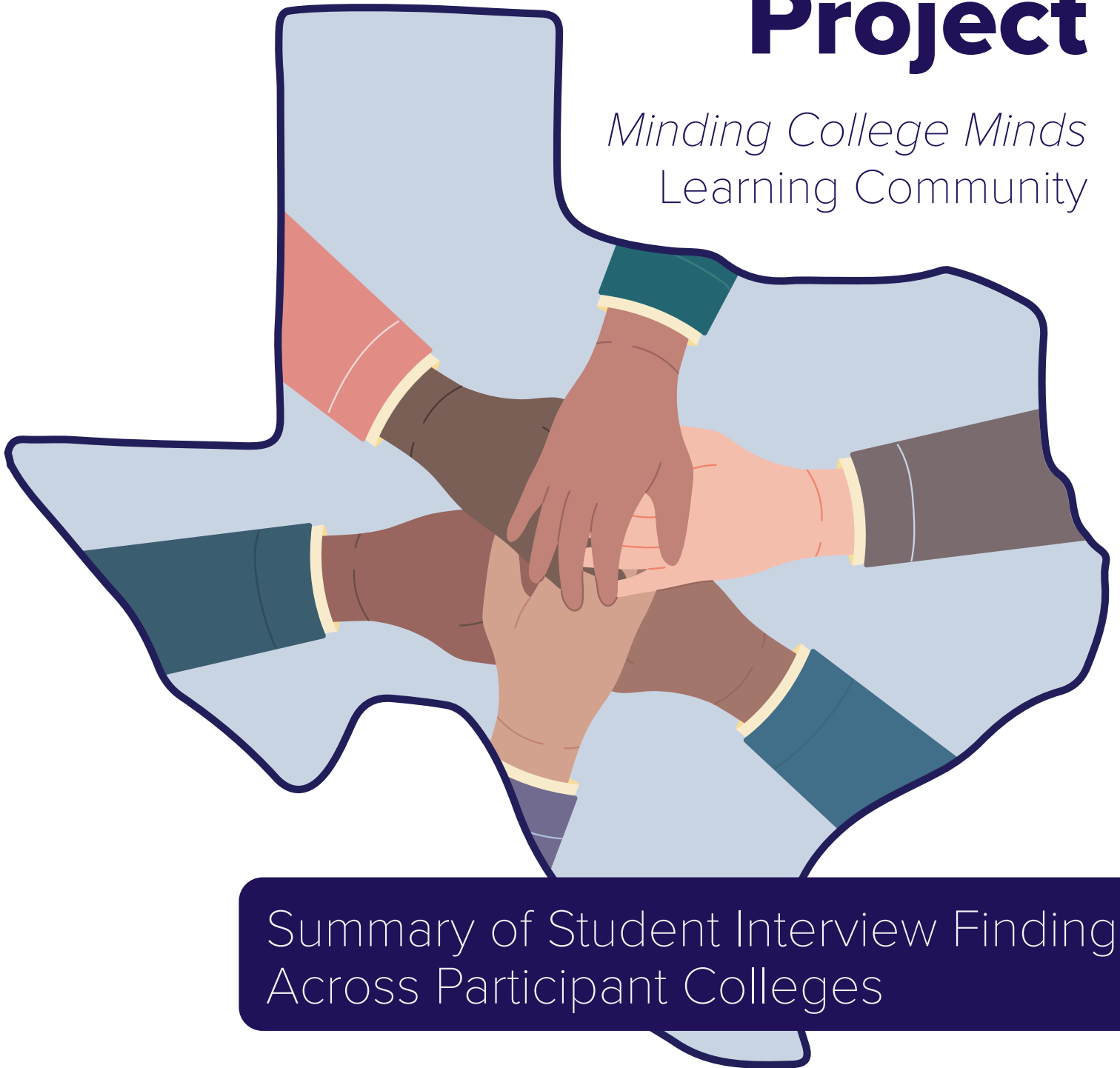


Belonging & Wellness Project

Minding College Minds
Learning Community



Summary of Student Interview Findings
Across Participant Colleges

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CCCSE would like to thank the four Texas community colleges that allowed us to conduct interviews with their students in fall 2025. Without these voices, we would not be able to demonstrate how Texas community college students' mental health and well-being affect their experiences. Finally, we thank the students who shared their stories of purpose and perseverance with us. This report is dedicated to them.

CCCSE is a service and research initiative in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of CCCSE and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Texas Success Center or ECMC Foundation or Ascendium Education Group.

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OVERVIEW OF STUDENT INTERVIEWS

For over 20 years, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) has delivered “aha” moments about the student experience and assisted institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment. One of the ways CCCSE shares these aha moments is through the student voice as captured during student interviews.

As an enhancement to the Belonging and Wellness project, the Texas Success Center invited CCCSE to conduct student interviews in fall 2025 at four Texas community colleges, who were part of the Minding College Minds Learning Community. Each of the four participating colleges received a report based upon the themes that emerged from the interview conversations.

Through the four interview visits, CCCSE spoke with 64 students. This work is supported by the ECMC Foundation and Ascendium Education Philanthropy, a division of Ascendium Education Group.

Findings from these interviews will inform statewide pathway recommendations and help colleges strengthen their own practices.

- » Why they chose their college and how they navigate academic pathways
- » Experiences of belonging, relationships, and campus culture
- » Financial aid and basic needs challenges and supports
- » Stress, mental health, and coping strategies
- » Suggestions for improving access, communication, and support

To highlight the breadth and nuance of these conversations, selected student quotes are included in this summary. Quotes appear in italics and are lightly edited for clarity.



ACCESS AND FIT DRIVE ENROLLMENT AND PERSISTENCE

Across colleges, students chose their institutions because they were accessible, affordable, and offered clear, practical pathways. Proximity to home allowed them to balance school with work and family responsibilities, while targeted programs and supports made college feel attainable.

Students pointed to:

- » Dual credit and early outreach that connected them to college while still in high school
- » Scholarships and promise programs that reduced financial barriers
- » Re-enrollment supports that allowed them to return after stopping out
- » Hands-on programs and transferable core coursework that aligned with their goals

One student explained the importance of a nearby campus:

I chose to attend this community college because it was the closest one to my home and where I live.

Another described weighing ambition against financial reality and uncertainty about major:

I was first looking at Harvard...but I thought back...I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, and then two, obviously money because my family's not rich.

For many, community college was not seen as a consolation prize but as a strategic starting point and a place they would return to for additional training over time:

It's not that far from my house...I want to get a bachelor's...so right now I'm just taking my core classes...and then transfer to a bigger university.

Straight out of high school, I came...I dropped out because I didn't have enough money...Later I saw 'Last Step'—re enroll...they would help with your tuition.

BELONGING IS BUILT THROUGH EVERYDAY RELATIONSHIPS

Students described belonging as something created one interaction at a time—through greetings, guidance, and genuine care from staff, faculty, and peers. These moments shaped whether campus felt intimidating or like a place they could call home.

Across colleges, students recalled being welcomed and helped from the moment they arrived:

Whenever I go to the tutoring lab, they are always welcoming me. They are always ready to assist you. ...I just love [this college]. They are welcoming. I've never felt out of place.

When I was talking to the employees in Student Support Services...they were very happy to help and explain the processes.

I came in the wrong way...the ladies up front gave me a big smile and said, 'Go to this building.' Everybody's so willing to help.

Relationships with advisors and faculty often grew into mentorship:

My advisor here, she's like my mentor...she pushed me in a positive way, got me into leadership, really molded me into the person I am today.

Students also emphasized the power of visible leaders and small community dynamics:

I got a little bit lost...a person walked up and said, 'Hey, do you need help?'...It was the president of the college.

Everybody here treated me just like as one of their own...I feel very at home, and very like I belong in this college.

Belonging was not automatic; some students described initially keeping to themselves until peer connections and supportive instructors helped them feel more comfortable:

When I started my class, people weren't friendly, so I kept to myself...As time went on I became more social... then I felt like I belonged more.

BASIC NEEDS SUPPORTS ARE ESSENTIAL, NOT EXTRA

Students across colleges underscored that basic needs supports are critical to their ability to attend class, concentrate, and persist. Food markets, gas cards, tuition assistance, and childcare support were described as lifelines.

On food insecurity, one student shared:

There's a market that we go to twice a month...and they help you with assistance for food...It's helped me because I've needed food...when you're hungry and going to class, it's not fun when your stomach is making all these kind of noises.

Another described the breadth of items available at a campus market:

There's dry, there's refrigerated, and then there's frozen...protein bars, sweets...even some women sanitation, like deodorant and stuff like that.

Even relatively small supports like gas cards made a tangible difference:

I've gotten gas cards...It's \$20, but honestly, they help so much. That's one gas filling almost. It helps.

Students also valued clear information about how tuition is covered:

After scholarships cover tuition, whatever is left the school covers. If you don't have scholarships, the school covers the exact amount of tuition.

At the same time, many described having to persist through complex or confusing processes to access aid:

My transfers kept disappearing, so they wouldn't go through. It was really hard to get the financial aid to get passed through, but eventually they did get passed through.

I applied for financial aid my first semester but didn't qualify...I never reapplied. ...We've paid out-of-pocket.

These stories highlight both the power of basic needs supports and the need for simpler, more proactive systems to deliver them.

STRESS, MENTAL HEALTH, AND COPING ARE CENTRAL TO THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Students spoke openly about stress and mental health, describing how academic load, finances, work, and caregiving intersect to shape their wellbeing.

Some described intense periods of overwhelm:

I was feeling a lot of stress, to the point I had no appetite. I wasn't eating, and I lost 10 pounds from it.

I was really rushed...since I have a learning disability, it took way too long for me to comprehend what was going on. I was having insomnia because I would be staying up, stressed out for the next day.

Others noted that stress was high at first but became more manageable as they found routines:

At first, I was very overwhelmed because there were so many classes and assignments, but right now, I'm just taking it little by little.

Initially, it was stressful because I took on a volunteering role and a club secretary role...Now that it's gotten through the first half of the semester, I'm like, 'Okay, I have a great rhythm now.'

Students also described how mental health is tied to life events and structural realities:



Sometimes I just feel angry...My grandma died...grief and sadness just comes in waves.

Coping strategies ranged from everyday self care to professional counseling:

I step away a little bit...talk to my mom or my grandma or watch a movie or play sudoku.

I go to the gym...I do that or talk to friends about it. I feel like I'm very open about my emotions.

I do attend counseling here. I think counseling definitely helps me a lot to put into perspective a lot of things.

Several students emphasized that reaching out for help takes courage:

I'm really shy when asking for help...I keep it in for weeks on end until I see that I really need it.

BALANCING SCHOOL, WORK, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY ROLES REQUIRES FLEXIBILITY

Most students juggled college with work, parenting, caregiving, leadership, or small businesses. Flexible scheduling and understanding from employers and faculty were critical to making school possible.

Examples included:

I work here and I'm a student and I'm a mom.

I have four children at home...[Childcare] gives me a little bit of time to study, and get homework done, and keep up with the housework.

Having both schoolwork and work...I do my job stuff before I even think about my schoolwork.

I'm a receptionist...nights or 12-hour shifts on weekends...they allow me to do my homework at work.

Leadership and involvement also played a role:

I am the president of the student government association...[and] student liaison to the board of trustees.

I'm actually the treasurer of the maritime club...It helps people get jobs in the maritime industry.

These experiences highlight how flexible course offerings, on-campus employment, and leadership opportunities can both accommodate students' lives and build the skills and confidence that support persistence.



COMMUNICATION AND PROCESSES NEED TO BE CLEAR, PROACTIVE, AND MULTI CHANNEL

While students praised the breadth of services available, they frequently noted that finding and using those services can be difficult. They called for clearer, more proactive communication and simpler processes.

Students recommended:

- » Using text messages, social media, and in-class announcements to supplement email
- » Including tours and service explanations in orientation so students know where to go when needs arise
- » Making services “inescapable” through repeated promotion in multiple formats

As one student put it:

I was thinking a text message...a lot of people don't look at their email...maybe [text] messages would be good, or an announcement on a speaker or something at the school.

Another described only learning about supports after becoming an employee:

I didn't fully understand what services were offered until I became an employee, until I actually came on campus.

Students also wanted more proactive financial aid communication:

There was one year where I did receive it a little later, so we had to pay out of pocket...I would say reach out to us more or send out letters...not keeping us in the dark.

And they stressed the need to streamline navigation:

Streamline resources so students don't have to go through multiple sections—fixing things is frustrating.

A lot of the stuff we have, we have to dig deep to find it.

For online courses, responsiveness was a major concern:

Reaching out to online here...is very difficult. Most of the time you email. You don't get an email back...that's the only hugest downfall that I see here.

Taken together, these comments point to the importance of simple, well-communicated pathways for accessing help.

CARING FACULTY, SUPPORTIVE STAFF, AND CAMPUS CULTURE ARE COLLEGES' GREATEST STRENGTHS

Across all four colleges, students pointed to people and campus culture as the primary reasons they stayed enrolled. Faculty who take extra time, staff who show genuine care, and an environment that respects students' complex lives were central to persistence.

Students described:

Like my professor now...he stays after class to answer everybody's questions.

I think [this college] in general is just great because I feel like they work with you.

Well, my team is wonderful...There's a lot of community here, really. They're very compassionate and they're caring. The humanness of it is just wonderful.

Every day I wake up, I'm just happy to come here...I love being here.

Others captured the sense of home and comfort:

[This college has] become like a second home to me.

It's like family. It feels comfortable.

The atmosphere is very calm and nice...I feel like I'm part of the community here.

These voices suggest that, even amid structural challenges, cultures of care at community colleges are powerful anchors for student success.

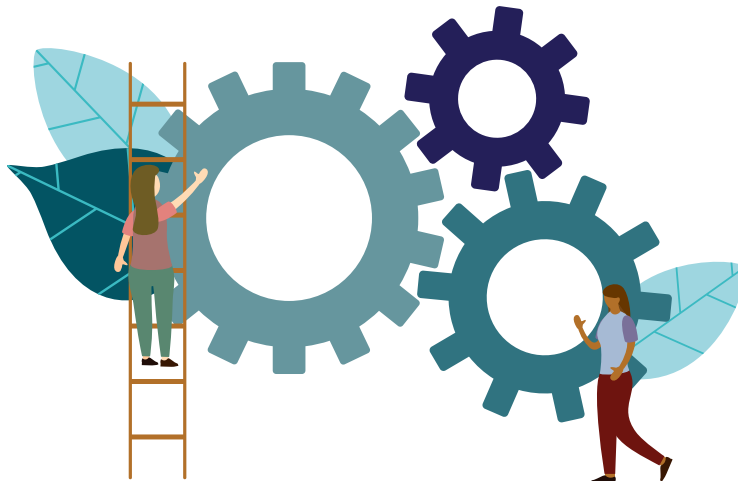


CROSS COLLEGE TAKEAWAYS

Across the four colleges, student narratives converge around several overarching lessons:

- » Access and fit matter. Proximity, affordability, and multiple on-ramps (dual credit, promise programs, transfer and re-enrollment pathways) are critical to initial enrollment and reentry when life interrupts college.
- » Belonging is relational. Everyday interactions with staff, faculty, and peers—especially when leaders are visible and front line staff are welcoming—shape whether students feel they belong and can ask for help.
- » Basic needs supports work. Food markets, gas cards, childcare assistance, and clear tuition coverage directly remove barriers to attendance and learning; students experience these supports as necessary, not optional.
- » Well-being is central to academic progress. Stress, mental health, and life events profoundly affect students' ability to persist; visible, destigmatized mental health supports and coping resources are essential.
- » Communication and processes can be strengthened. Students need streamlined, multi channel communication and clear, proactive guidance around financial aid, services, and online courses to avoid “digging” for support.
- » Engagement and flexibility sustain success. Leadership roles, work study, campus jobs, and community involvement build confidence and skills, while flexible course offerings and understanding instructors make it possible for students to remain enrolled alongside work and caregiving.

These themes offer a roadmap for colleges, systems, and funders seeking to create environments where students not only access college, but are fully supported to complete credentials and pursue the futures they envision.



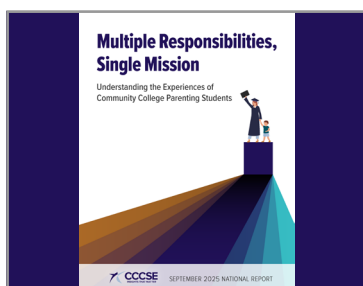
CCCSE RESOURCES TO INFORM PRACTICE

To provide national context and evidence-based frames for themes emerging in these student interviews, the following reports offer research, guiding questions, and practical tools. The following are available through the [CCCSE publications page](#) and can support ongoing reflection and planning.



Essential Conditions for Community College Student Success: Maximizing Student Engagement by Fostering a Culture of Caring (October 2025)

To continue to enhance college's culture of caring, this national report highlights intentional, institution-wide practices and attitudes that help students feel supported, seen, and connected. It draws on data from tens of thousands of community college students and suggests key dimensions of caring, including belonging, help-seeking behaviors, basic needs support, and consideration of mental health and well-being. The report also offers reflective questions colleges can use to assess and strengthen their own caring environments—all of which closely aligns with interview themes. This report might be helpful to share with adjunct faculty or to feature during the college's professional development days. (Download the report and supporting materials: <https://cccse.org/culture-of-caring>)



Multiple Responsibilities, Single Mission: Understanding the Experiences of Community College Parenting Students (September 2025)

This report examines the lived realities of students who are parents or caregivers—who make up a significant portion of the community college population. It explores how parenting responsibilities intersect with academic goals and highlights both the dedication and the barriers these students face. Because some of the students in the interviews were balancing caregiving, work, and school, this report offers data and insights that can inform college's efforts to support student parents more effectively. (Download the report and supporting materials: <https://cccse.org/parenting-students>)



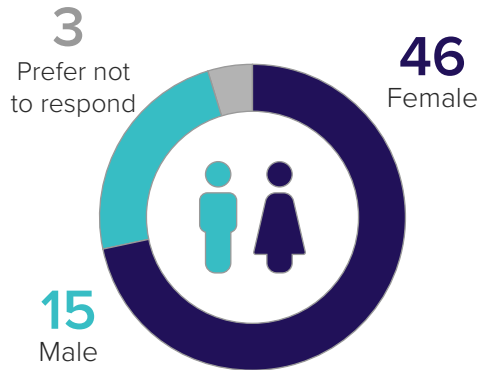
Supporting Minds, Supporting Learners: Addressing Student Mental Health to Advance Academic Success (Fall 2024)

This national report focuses on mental health and well-being among community college students and emphasizes that colleges must understand and respond to these challenges holistically. Drawing on survey data from over 60,000 students, the report discusses rising mental health concerns and highlights gaps in awareness and use of supports—an important theme from the interviews. (Download the report and supporting materials: <https://cccse.org/supporting-minds>)

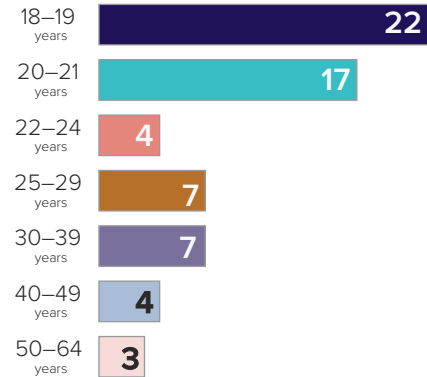
APPENDIX

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

GENDER



AGE



ENROLLMENT INFORMATION



38 participants had gone to college immediately after high school.



47 participants said theirs was the first college they attended.

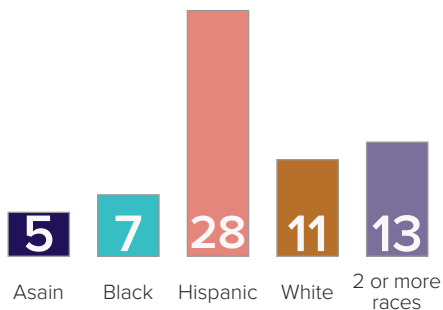


44 students were attending college full time.

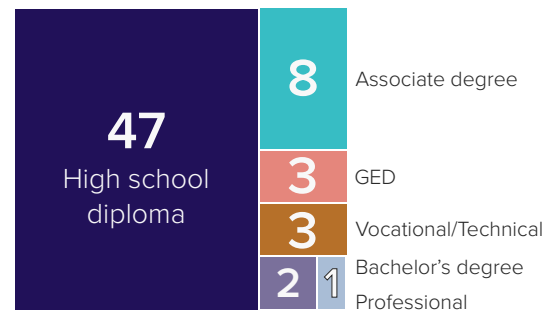


16 students were in their first semester at the college.

RACE



HIGHEST DEGREE



FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE



41 students were eligible for financial aid, and **40** received it.
One student did not apply.

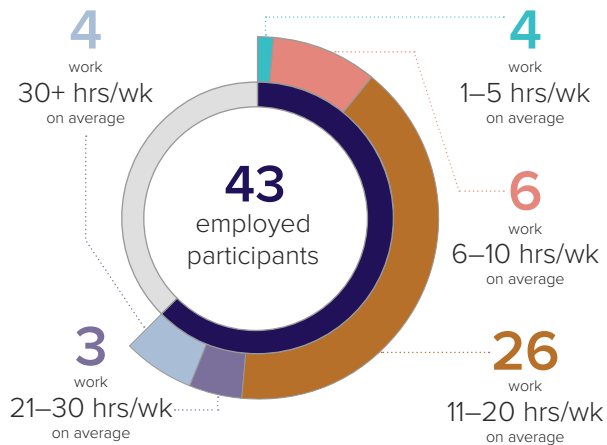


4 student did not know if they were eligible or not.



18 students were **not** eligible for financial aid.

EMPLOYMENT



OTHER DEMOGRAPHICS



9 students were first-generation college students.



9 students were married.

CHILDREN & CHILDCARE



11 students had children or other dependents living at home with them.



5 students have children who did not require childcare.



3 students have childcare outside of the college.



3 students did not have childcare, but needed it.



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